

Ethnic Hiring in Kenya as a Development Concern

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Abstract: Ethnicity is a very sensitive and emotive subject that is not publicly discussed in Kenya when it comes to economic and social issues. But ethnicity has been known to influence our way of life in many ways especially politics and social interactions. However little regard has been paid to how ethnicity influences hiring in Kenya which has left many ethnic groups marginalized when it comes to employment. This study seeks to find the logic of employers' ethnic hiring and how they deal with ethnicity when hiring to ensure competitive hiring when under pressure from different parties and in the interest of the organization's growth and profitability. The study undertakes a desk review of theoretical and empirical studies and policy documents. This is done by looking at Kenya's hiring and ethnicity environment. The study found there is lack of economic logic in ethnic hiring in Kenya and it is a social attitude that lacks substantive economic backing.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Hiring, Logic, Development, Business

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper provides a full analysis of how ethnicity enters the market to influence hiring not giving the employers much of an option to hire competitively an aspect not considered before in Kenya. Where there is labor market discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, it implies the disadvantageous and differential treatment of minority group members on the basis of their ethnic characteristics (Gaddis, 2018). This could mean non-inclusion of minority ethnic groups who were not hired competitively even when they are qualified for the jobs they seek. Ethnicity and group based hiring have profound socio-economic effects on the development of many countries in Africa which includes Kenya (Chua, 1998). This makes economic progress and eventual development a herculean task because ethnic divisions have permeated most African countries.

Kenya is a multi-ethnic society and has more than 44 ethnic groups that live side by side in relative peace. Economically Kenya is well endowed with vast rich resources and is relatively stable with incidents of political unrest every election year mainly because of what is believed to be ethnic conflicts. KNBS (2019) reports that the country has a population of 47.5million according to its population census in 2019. To the World Bank (2016), Kenya is a developing country with an average economic growth rate of 5.8% but unfortunately Kenya's economic growth is very cyclical because of ethnic politics. In 2007 the economic growth rate was at 6.9% and after the disputed presidential elections it dropped to 1.7% in 2008 (World Bank, 2016).

Ethnicity in Kenya

Johnson, (2018) has claimed one's ethnicity in Kenya is known mostly by the attribute of one's name and the county that you come from. Ethnicity in Kenya is unfortunately viewed in terms of ethnic inequality because of imbalance in regional economic development that is aggravated by political divisions that have seen inequitable support by the governments of the day to many ethnic groups in Kenya (Kramon and Posner, 2016). Such disadvantage distances these ethnic groups from centers of power and decision making. Kenya as a society has had challenges of ethnic competition mainly over land and political power for quite some time. This is because much of the country's population is rural and dependent on agriculture (Miller, 2018). Increasing density of rural population on arable land has led to a decline in income from agricultural activities, forcing most of the population to migrate to urban areas to seek better paying jobs (Muyanga & Jayne, 2014). With increased urbanization and scarcity of arable land the landscape of the job seeking population has changed.

Empirical studies have revealed a decline in the agricultural households from 90% in the 1960s to 49% in 2000s (Nicodemus and Ness, 2010). This indicates a decline in the economic significance of farming as a main economic activity of the rural population due to low prices on agricultural output making agriculture unprofitable besides decrease in the size of land as it is bequeathed to children (Loizou, Karelakis, Galanopoulos and Mattas, 2019; Wineman and Liverpool-Tasie, 2019). This has led to the rural population seeking alternative non-farm activities such as business and employment with better earnings, which means increase in household income with more people looking for employment (Haggblade, Hazel and Rardon, 2010). As a result, there has been a rise in unemployment in the rural agricultural population which has led to increasing demand for jobs in the urban towns (Thorns, 2017; Melo and Ames, 2016). Finding no forthcoming, many Kenyans have turned to their kin in positions of influence for assistance in getting a job. This has led to ethnic groups' preferences in many dimensions of the Kenyan society such as economics and politics to garner support for ethnic kinsmen empowerment (wa Githinji, 2015; Li, 2018).

Employers are under pressure to hire from their own ethnic-group members out of ethnic preferences which previously was interpreted in terms of tastes. Taste-based discrimination is where individuals discriminate even if there is no known behavioral uncertainty. It is becoming clear that it is not

always the “*big man*” syndrome that may bring about ethnic antagonism but socioeconomic factors such as unemployment (Gazibo, 2019).

Ethnicity and Economic Development

No country can achieve economic development without well developed and managed manpower to exploit the natural resources available in a country (Dinh and Dinh, 2016). It is worthy to note that, what separates developing countries from developed countries is the gap between knowledge and use of resources. In case of Kenya, it could be people’s lack of knowledge that ethnicity is not the approach to solving one’s own ethnic groups’ economic problems; a better approach would be policy approach on a national scale. In developing countries there is a general imbalance of skilled manpower that sees pressure groups come to action to address the problem (Musset and Kurekova, 2018)). Most Kenyans rely on the government to improve their economic wellbeing because the market does not expand fast enough to absorb the available labor force leaving many Kenyans jobless (Singh and Zammit, 2019). Kenyans look to the government for employment opportunities as Kenya’s government keeps promising to create more jobs. This is because of the catalyzing developmental role of the government (Stiglitz, 2021).

However there is a great impediment to this, which is ethnicity as government’s policies to promote ethnic diversity have not been widely embraced. This has left many ethnic groups unrepresented when it comes to employment leading to social disenchantment as dissatisfaction increases in the face of socioeconomic inequalities (Oino and Kioli, 2014). This is evident in a survey conducted by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC, 2016) which shows that inequalities in employment in the public sector exist. The survey established that over 50% of Kenya’s ethnic groups are marginally represented in the civil service, the country’s largest employment sector (NCIC, 2016).

Often ethnicity is said to be the cause of polarized societies which can’t agree on needed public goods (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Most studies on Africa hold a view that because of the low population density it is difficult to generate the kind of trust which crosses boundaries that is required for the provision of public goods since frequent human contact ensures the creation of the required social capital. This limits the extent of interaction, making most ethnic groups seek their own ‘good’ without considering others. Where there is no ethnic diversity in employment there is a lack of openness which leads to a country having flawed monetary and fiscal policies, low saving rates and as a result low economic development especially in developing countries (Stiglitz, 2017).

Ethnicity and Employment in Kenya

Kenya is a country of geopolitical and economic importance in East Africa. It is a hub for trade, communication, finance,

and transportation across the region (Hope, 2017). Although relatively stable since its independence in 1963, Kenya still faces challenges such as poverty, inequality, and corruption and more recently ethnic animosity, resource or political based. Many Kenyans believe that ethnicity is the cause of inequality especially in terms of employment opportunities (Kramon & Posner, 2016; Wanyande, 2016; Hellsten, 2016).

Looking up to ethnic group members in positions of influence for a job may be noble for those members who are looking for a job, but it could have a negative impact on the economy because it is unlikely that one ethnic group can have all the potential without the input of the others to the economy (Nguyen & Velayuthan, 2018). This is more of a reactive approach to a social challenge. Many people perceive that politics has a key role to play in the prevalence of ethnicity in a country but it is socio-economic behavior and the relationships of citizens that greatly impact the way people relate in the country (Desmet, Ortuño-Ortín and Wacziarg, 2017). Ethnicity has been seen as a great factor that contributes to business interaction and the subsequent impact on economic development (Warrick, 2017). Besides, ethnic diversity is one of the major factors that explain the quality of government in a country especially in Kenya (Kirk, Stein and Fisher, 2018).

Ethnicity and Unemployment in Kenya

In Kenya ethnicity has come to be at the center of the country’s employment scene because of high unemployment. According to the World Bank (2016) unemployment rates in Kenya have been the highest in the East African region at 12.7% and this has not changed much especially with the effects of the pandemic in 2021. Ethnicity could be influencing hiring practices in Kenya and this gives an insight on how this impacts Kenya’s economic progress as kinsmen in positions of power are relied upon by ethnic group members to help them get a job. Kenya is considered an economic power house in the East African region but has had the highest unemployment rate of 10.4% (KNBS, 2020). There are many educated and qualified Kenyan youth who are underemployed or unemployed and most are faced with formal employment uncertainties (Mwaura, 2017). Getting a job in Kenya is becoming toilsome day by day and ethnicity as a factor that influences hiring decisions in Kenya, it has been found in the public and private sectors to indeed influence employers on the ethnicity of who they hire.

For instance, there is microeconomic evidence on the direct effect of ethnic divisions on productivity as found in team production at a plant of floriculture in Kenya, where an upstream worker supplies and distributes flowers to two downstream workers, who assemble them into bunches (Hjort, 2014). The plant uses an essentially random rotation process to assign workers to positions, leading to teams that are ethnically homogeneous and where one or both downstream workers belong to an ethnic group in rivalry with the upstream worker’s ethnic group. This evidence found that upstream

workers undersupply non-co-ethnic downstream workers (vertical discrimination) and shift flowers from non-co-ethnic to co-ethnic downstream workers (horizontal discrimination), at the cost of lowering one's own pay and total output (Hjort, 2014).

Ksoll, Macchiavello and Morjaria (2010) in their study indicated that indeed there was a negative effect of ethnic rivalry on growth of flower industry in Kenya.

Interethnic rivalries lowers efficiency in an organization, that the economic costs of ethnic diversity vary with the ethnic environment, and that in high-cost environments, firms are forced to adopt "second best" policies to limit discrimination distortions (Jailani, Dewantara and Rahmani, 2021).). There is the possibility of an additional direct effect on productivity in an organization that has been recognized because it has been argued that individuals of different ethnic groups may complement each other in production (Lazear, 1999). However, it is not uncommon to have negative effects of ethnic diversity on output in the context of joint production especially in Kenya (Odhiambo, 2012). This is depends on how output responds to increased conflict between ethnic groups and on how firms respond to lower productivity (Grossman and Oberfield, 2021). Evidence from developing countries on the productivity effects of ethnic diversity is largely elusive (Verhoogen, 2021). However studies have shown that ethnic animosity affects economic growth and development (Nirola and Sahu, 2019). There is a broad consensus regarding the magnitude and explanation of earnings' differentials based on ethnicity in Kenya and ethnicity as a source of earnings inequality in the region which may make it impossible for economic growth and development and this makes it possible to understand the economic effects of ethnicity (Rockmore, 2011; Saasa, 2018).

The reason behind this review is that many Kenyans who own a business are biased when hiring and this is greater now than was previously estimated. There are many studies that have been done in Kenya on ethnicity and political violence, education favoritism and jobs as a reward for political alliances but no study has sought to investigate the concerns of ethnic hiring on economic development as ethnicity is a reality many Kenyans seeking employment have to contend with (Li, 2018; Kramon and Posner, 2016).

The review on several authors has found that ethnic hiring has led to ethnic inequality and its resultant effects on economic development (Chandra and Wilkinson, 2008). Economic inequality not only negatively impacts on the economic wellbeing of Kenyans but also on the health of an individual which is an important component of a person's productivity (Chandra and Wilkinson, 2008). This not only weakens the social fabric of the society resulting in many social ills such as crime but it also has an overall effect on the economic performance of the country (Bapuji, Ertug, and Shaw, 2020). Empirical studies show that ethnic disparities in Kenya have long been treated as peripheral elements in economics (Yieke,

2010). This has failed to significantly address the problems which could alleviate ethnic inequality. Ethnic inequality is linked to economic underdevelopment of many parts of the country and when you look at the dimensions of ethnic inequality in Kenya the most significant are economic and political inequalities (Novak, 2017).

These economic and political inequalities have led to high unemployment levels in Kenya because they have skewed the economic system to favor the few strong ethnic groups (Bapuji, Ertug, and Shaw, 2020). As a result, it is now widely accepted and expected that if you get a job with a position of influence then you must promote your ethnic group members, meaning there is social pressure for those deemed to be in positions of power and influence to help their ethnic kinsmen get jobs. According to psychologists and sociologists it may be good for a specific community but the only problem is that it is not an all-inclusive approach and it does not support collective action especially for progress for all as most seek group interests and not others' group interests (Smith and Silva, 2011; Kimenyi, 2017). It is also known to end once there is a change in leadership. But if someone is willing to get involved in others' group interests they are mainly seeking political support.

Many advocacies related bodies as well as government employment policy suggest that each individual in-charge of hiring must see beyond their own interests and those of their community and embrace Kenyan ethnic diversity so that our ethnic values would be reckoned as a national wealth and not an impediment to our economic progress (Republic of Kenya, 2008a).

Ethnic and Inequality

Ethnic conflicts and ethnic inequality in any country play a huge role with regard to bad economic performance, low quality of institutions, along with poorly implemented economic policies. Apparently the practice is more pronounced in public organizations; even with the establishment of an authority to oversee the ethnic balance in hiring, the National Cohesion and Integrity Commission (NCIC, 2016). Since independence the creation of productive and sustainable employment opportunities has remained a central policy priority of the Kenya government (Omolo, 2010). It was believed that long-term and sustained high rates of economic growth would facilitate generation of employment opportunities at rates higher than the proportionate increase in the labor force (Republic of Kenya, 2008b).

However many areas have promoted ethnicity in Kenya, from the education system and institutions to public service and private organizations (Simson, 2019). For example Tanzania has pursued more serious nation building policies through its education system (Keller, 2019). In Kenya it has been made worse by the new devolved system of county government where the counties are ethnic based. There is a good observation of ethnic inequalities in the education system in

Kenya where some regions occupied by certain ethnic groups may have resources and infrastructural support that put them on a better economic footing especially as a result of their proximity to the ruling elites making them have advanced advantage in job opportunities and development (Nwapi and Andrews, 2017).

Not many studies on ethnicity in Kenya quite address ethnicity and hiring how the employers go about the hiring process in the interest of both the firm and the economy at large. In the interest of a country's citizens it calls for viewing of ethnic diversity in the context of its integration with the labor market policies of the country (Bisin, Patacchini, Viedier and Zenou, 2011). But ethnic mobilization relates to intergroup struggles over scarce resources leading to ethnic in-groups orientation to harnessing their own resources to improve their well-being (Cunningham, 2012).

According to the country's long-term development blueprint: Vision 2030, the Medium Term Plan (2008-2012), Sector Plan for Labor, Youth and Human Resource Development (2008-2012), the country's employment problem is manifested in the slow growth of the formal sector employment vis-à-vis a burgeoning informal sector offering high and increasing number of precarious jobs; a 10.4% unemployment rate; an increasing number of the working poor; rapidly changing forms of employment with limited job security; high youth unemployment, the majority (90 percent) of whom lack appropriate vocational and professional training to effectively participate in the labor market (Republic of Kenya, 2008a; 2008b).

Kenya has the highest youth unemployment rate in East Africa where for working age population of 24million, one in every six young Kenyans is unemployed unlike Uganda and Tanzania which have one in every 20 youth unemployed (World Bank, 2016). For more than four and a half decades now, the Kenya government has continuously articulated the need to create sufficient employment opportunities to absorb the country's growing labor force. Unemployment and underemployment have been identified as Kenya's most difficult and persistent problems (Republic of Kenya, 2008a & b). According to government plan, Kenya's unemployment is mainly attributed to slow growth and the weak labor absorptive capacity of the economy, a mismatch in skills, development and demand, imperfect information flow and inherent rigidities within the country's labor market. The answer to unemployment in Kenya has been ethnic alignment where those who manage to get to positions of power assist their own by giving them jobs even when they don't qualify especially in the public institutions. This became a national concern which led to the establishment of commissions mandated to oversee equitable and fair distribution of the country's employment opportunities, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission and Public Service Commission. Ethnic hiring practice in the public sector has caused the same challenge in the private sector which is not governed by the

commission's recruitment Act resulting in the high influence of ethnicity in hiring practices.

Employers Dilemma

An employer in Kenya is faced with a myriad of situations to consider when making hiring decisions and ethnicity is one of them. An employer has to make the decision to hire in the face of some ethnic groups that are politically dominating or in other instances in case of political alliances (Lee, 2018). All this brings the focus on the employer who is faced with the task of hiring and his behavior when hiring in view of ethnicity. Ethnicity is the culprit of unemployment to a certain extent because unemployment influences the degree and prospects of integration for ethnic groups in the labor market in Kenya.

This paper highlights if there is any employer's effort to overcome ethnicity in the process of hiring decisions. This is amid ethnic challenges such as social expectations to hire his own ethnic group members that are imposed on him thereby possibly impeding him from making the right and desired choice of an employee in the interest of the organization (Van Laer & Janssen, 2017). It has often been pointed out that what employers say is not what they do when they choose who to hire. The greatest challenge of ethnicity to an employer when making hiring decisions he is faced with social expectations from family and his own ethnic group, economic expectations from shareholders and political expectations from alliances. This makes it difficult for an employer to hire the right person and have the correct relationship with the economy, with his business being more productive and expand production when he has the right workforce despite their ethnicity. Many studies show the willingness of the employer to practice ethnic hiring without considering why (Derous, Pepermans and Ryan, 2017). Further empirical reviews have found out that there is dilemma for the employer having to follow the non-economic logic of ethnic hiring and not hire correctly which may make his business less productive. This puts pressure on the current economic circumstances by allowing ethnicity to influence hiring thereby discouraging an employer from hiring appropriately (Brynin, Karim & Zwysen, 2019). In case there is a restriction on ethnic discrimination through employment legislation an employer may be able to hire appropriately (Baert, Cockx, Gheyle and Vandamme, 2015). In Kenya despite the employment Act of 2007 ethnic hiring still continues and no one has been prosecuted for contravening the Act especially in the public sector.

Organization and Ethnic Hiring in Kenya

In Kenya many organizations don't make their hiring policy public or the ethnic composition of their workforce known to the public. Ethnicity has been known to have an impact on employment but no study has been carried out to determine its economic logic even when there are negative results from its influence on hiring. Being able to distinguish the list of mechanisms and the logic of hiring such as political group or

social pressure, and social expectations, an employer who hires from his ethnic group because of these reasons, may hire a less qualified person, offer lower pay and expect more work to be done making the hired person believe it's a favor and the employer's belief it is a responsibility to his own ethnic group, thus meeting the social expectation at the cost of a progressive economy. Employers may also have beliefs that their own ethnic group is better because of perceptions and attitudes.

Many business owners think hiring their kinsmen is a favor to their community with little knowledge of the harm done to the economy due to the limitation of opportunities and underproduction which slows down economic growth of the firm in the long run. It is imperative for the business owners to acknowledge qualified laborers from other ethnic groups but seeing discrimination is practiced the world over for different reasons; business owners need to be aware of the causal link when hiring the right person enabling their business to thrive (Berry and Bell, 2012). Unfortunately in Kenya ethnicity has a social link and many people do not comprehend its negative effect on the economic development of the country when they make economic decisions based on ethnic grounds such as hiring. This creates a social influence on a lot of decisions made for the country both economic and political which creates a fundamental concern about the extent of social identities and links and their eventual dominance of the country's trajectory to development.

Ethnicity and the Labor Relations

From an economic development perspective ethnicity if not well managed may cause fractionalization and polarization (Karnane & Quinn, 2019). This may have negative effects on economic development through reduction of investment because it reduces diffusion of ideas across the economy (Gören, 2017). Due to ethnicity in hiring the casual relationships between employers and workers have impaired labor relations, eroded worker protection and transferred additional responsibilities, such as social and trade union protection, job security, and wage negotiations to the worker. This leads to a lack of motivation and it increases shirking thereby decreasing effort. This could partly explain the persistently low levels of labor productivity, low enterprise competitiveness and the slow economic growth rates in Kenya (Omolo, 2010).

For a long time ethnicity has played a key part in our economy but it was loudly critiqued because of its influence in bad politics. Taking into consideration the ethnic diversity in Kenya and with the latest exposure of ethnic imbalances in government institutions especially the parastatals then it's not uncommon that the genesis of all this lies in the citizens themselves who are now socialized to accept ethnicity as means to an end (NCIC, 2016). Ethnicity is now seen as a factor that influences hiring in private businesses as well as public institutions in Kenya, a result of 'our' attitude that you cannot get a job unless you know somebody or what is known as a "godfather" attitude. This hinges on the notion that

Kenya's development problems cannot be divorced from the negative ramifications of ethnicity (Noyoo, 2000). It is very clear that Kenya must first deal with ethnicity before tackling problems of political misrule, poverty and human misery (Noyoo, 2000). Development efforts in the country must be preceded by the political will on the part of national governments to bring forth tangible solutions to the question of ethnicity (Parshotam, 2018). The claim of ethnicity is modest but of concern is when one considers how little attention has been paid to ethnicity as a factor influencing hiring in our society and especially the impact it has on the country's economic development. Those who practice ethnicity when hiring act out of their own interests and those of their community but what they fail to understand is that it limits what one can draw in the additional value of relationships and the limitations in value created in the chain of production with the other members of the society. This may result in limiting the flow of information across out-groups in the economy (Gören, 2017). If ethnicity is considered when hiring, this limits the potential of the real workforce that has skills and the intellectual capacity required to exploit the resources the country has such as technology to propel the country's economic development. Taking into consideration the diverse ethnicity in Kenya, lack of an economic environment that embraces diversity shows how ethnic hiring in organizations affects the socio-economic development process of Kenya. This means ethnicity in Kenya influences market activities in ways that slow down the economies progress.

II. CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be concluded that ethnicity in hiring lacks economic logic and only causes socio-economic exclusion of minority ethnic groups not represented in positions of power. The possible element of ethnic hiring has limited short-run benefits which decrease the chances of a firm's growth in the long run. In the short run ethnic hiring may result in ethnic economies to serve the immediate needs of a marginalized group by enriching their economic relations with unpaid family workers and their co-ethnic workers. This works out well for them because the ethnic group eventually becomes visible in terms of economic empowerment. Due to ethnic hiring many formal businesses cannot absorb the labor competitively, leading to high unemployment in the country. This being the case, they rely heavily on labor drawn from their own ethnic groups for they may believe their group members are more productive while non-co-ethnics are not productive. In the long run ethnic hiring becomes a drawback to firms in Kenya both in the formal and informal sectors because it worsens the industrial conditions. The informal sector firms remain constrained in their growth while the formal firms experience more drawbacks because they miss out on what could be the most qualified non-co-ethnic personnel. They lose out on the economic benefits as the businesses have slow growth which becomes a drawback which ultimately slows the country's economic development.

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